



Christmas Eve, 11 pm – Being Present with Light

Prelude

Away in a Manger

Welcome—Welcome, friends, to this special night when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Whether you are a regular attender, this is your first time or your first time back in a while, you are welcome here! This year in this church, we have been spending time preparing for this night by becoming more “present.” You can see we have many presents here in the sanctuary. Being surrounded by them all Advent long has helped us be inspired to be more present — to ourselves, to each other, and to God. It all started with the idea that we can spend a lot of time worrying about finding the perfect Christmas presents. Deep down we want people in our lives to know they are special and that we love them. But sometimes we overlook the greatest gift we can offer... our very presence. Relationship is one of the most needed gifts in our world. Loneliness and isolation is, according to some experts, a crisis of our time. So no matter how able you are to offer gifts that the world considers “valuable,” really what we need the most is simply to “be with.” That is what one of the names for Jesus — “Emmanuel” — means: “God with us.” And this is the best gift of all. So, come, and be present tonight with God and one another as we welcome Christ our Savior among us.

Carol

O Come, All Ye Faithful, 182, with Bell Choir

A Reading from the Prophets—Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

Vivian Thomas

Isaiah was a prophet who spoke words of comfort when people needed it the most. He wrote in a time of occupation and exile of his people and by the end of the Book of Isaiah, the people have been freed. The scripture we are about to hear is toward the beginning of the book, though, and the people are scattered and afraid, feeling alone and desponded. Isaiah speaks what perhaps felt like an impossible prophetic word to remind the people that God is present with them always.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep
darkness—

on them light has shined.
³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing
plunder.
⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of
Midian.
⁵ For all the boots of the tramping
warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his
kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for
evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do
this.

Carol

Joy to the World, 179

Advent Wreath

Paula Prange

Chorus:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise [One], I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him: I will give my heart.*

Reader: We have unwrapped a present on each Sunday of Advent
with great anticipation for the gift that God will reveal.
Let us open our hearts as we open the gift!

The gift of hope is an essential survival tool
because it reminds us that the hard times do not have the last word.

The gift of Christ's peace reminds us that we can have peace
even in the midst of non-peaceful situations.

The gift of joy is not the equivalent of happiness,
but rather the deep call to delight in the small things.

The gift of love is the clarion call to us as Jesus' disciples.
The more love we put into the world, the better the world will be.

And tonight we celebrate the presence of the Light among us,
As we welcome the gift of the Light of the World born this night.

Reader 2: As we welcome the light, join us in singing our Advent chorus:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise [One], I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him: I will give my heart.*

Prayer of Presence

Reader: Holy Living God,
you are our Light.

Let this light grow in our lives each day,
so we can be a Present of Light to others.

Unwrap and open our hearts.

May it be so.

Amen.

Choir Anthem

When I Kneel at the Manger Tonight

A Christmas Prayer— In this prayerful, present moment we ask you, Christ Jesus, the Greatest Gift of All, to help us savor this moment of celebration of Christmas. Help us recognize and create moments of sweet presence rather than filling the voids with the things that do not last. Help us to stop, notice what we are experiencing, and accept it with open hearts and minds. In doing this, we allow you to meet us in the right here, right now, right where we are.

The Lord's Prayer (unison)—Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Bell Choir

O Night Divine

We Hear God's Word—Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

Paula Prange

Tonight, we hear the Christmas story as told in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke we find the shepherds, those caretakers of their sheep, ones who know how to care deeply in each present moment with the flock. They are central to this story. They are the ones who first hear the Good News. And while the light initially frightens them, they run toward it, not away. Hear the story from the Gospel of Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Carol

Away in the Manger, 203

Meditation

Being Present with Light

Carol

In the Bleak Midwinter, 196

We Respond to God's Word with Our Giving

Invitation—In Jesus Christ, we received the greatest gift of God’s love born into this world, into our lives, into our hearts. In response to that holiest, most sacred gift, we bring our gifts that God’s presence in this world might be made known through this work we have been called to do at Zion to serve and enrich our community.

Doxology

We Give Thanks—God of boundless love, we offer these gifts so that they may be transformed into your good news for the sake of the world. Amen.

Special Music

Kaylee Gephart, cello

We Share the Light of Christ

I want to invite us to get our candles ready to be lit, remembering that when the light comes to you, the unlit candle bends toward the lit candle for lighting. You’re invited to prepare your hymnals, too, to page 186 for “Silent Night.” But before we move to sharing the light, I want us to take a moment to sit and enjoy the gift of the darkness. Darkness is holy... it was in the dark of the night that Jesus was born from the dark of a womb. Our lives might not always feel “calm” or “bright.” But that does not mean that God is not present. It means that God is growing something within us, just waiting to be born. Too often we rush out of the times when we aren’t sure what is next for us. But if we sit with the darkness for a moment, our eyes begin to adjust, helping us to see more clearly. May we give ourselves the gift of time and room this season to be present, without judgement, to “what is” — to just be... present... If you are comfortable doing so, take a deep breath with me. Enjoy this moment as Bob Brown sing for us “O Holy Night.” During the song, I will bring the light to you.

Special Music

O Holy Night, Bob Brown

Hymn

Silent Night, #186

Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright
‘Round yon virgin mother and child; holy infant so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ, the Savior, is born! Christ, the Savior, is born!

Silent night! Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light,
Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Friends, the carol is over, but again, let us not rush to leave before we take in this moment fully. The Gift of the Light of Incarnation — God with us always — cannot help but spread. As we look around at the faces lit by our candles, what is revealed is the abundance of gifts that we are given — the presence of community, of each other. We are not alone. And we are deeply grateful.

Excerpt from “The Mood of Christmas” by Howard Thurman

*I will light Candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.*

Benediction— “The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is with us,
no matter what, no matter where, no matter when.

There is no place you can go where God is not,
no time of the day when God is off the clock.

This is the teaching of the Incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, Right Here, Right Now]

Thank you for your presence here tonight. What a gift.

Before you leave tonight, you are invited to take with you a gift of gratitude for your presence with us. Ornaments have been donated by Paula Prange as a special gift from our church family to you.

So now go and be truly present in the world
so you may be a gift of presence for others.
That's all that is expected —
that the gift that is YOU
is the best gift you can give.

In the name of the Holy Presence,
the Divine Gift,
and the Spirit of Light that is just waiting for us
to unwrap abundant life.

Merry Christmas!
Amen.

Postlude

Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne